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ABSTRACT

Answers from questionnaires administered to middle-class freshman and junior students in 4 different rural and suburban high schools were used to assess predisposition to violence. The findings indicated a modest inverse relation between violence proclivity and age, with a sharp difference between boys and girls, reflecting our cultural norms. Though violence-proneness showed no variation by social class, it proved strongly inversely related to school success. There was a clear indication of an association between conservative Christian orthodoxy and violence-proneness; however, people with no formal religious identification also proved violence-prone. One's perception of peer group norms also shows a strong relation to violence proclivity. The presence of a gratification-deferral syndrome, which includes aggression deferral, reduces violent proclivities. The strong relation to sex and school success, as well as to reference group norms and middle-class value commitments like gratification deferral, is strongly reminiscent of what the literature shows to be the chief determinants of juvenile delinquency. The assertion that Americans are a violent people is discussed. (KS)

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MIDDLE CLASS YOUTH AND PROCLIVITIES FOR VIOLENCE

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Late last year a semi-popularized report on data gathered for the National Commission on Violence began and ended with the same rhetorical question: "Are Americans a Violent People?" (Stark and McEvoy, 1970). Between the beginning and the end, the report clearly answered the question in the affirmative, to the surprise (we would think) of practically no one. An earlier report from the same body of data showed that large majorities of Americans of all classes, ages, and circumstances approved of the corporal punishment of children, of fighting between teenage boys, and of even more severely violent behavior on the parts of legitimate authorities like policemen, or of individuals clearly threatened by strangers (Lange, Baker, and Ball, 1969). Many other recent reports prepared for various national commissions show that physical violence of many kinds is an accepted part of the American literature, mass media, and general heritage (e.g. Graham and Gurr, 1969).

We submit, however, that to ask if Americans are a "violent people" is to ask a question without much real meaning or utility, unless one specifies at the same time the norms against which the answer is to be measured. It is a little like asking if Americans are a drunken people, or a criminal people, or, for that matter, a racist people; it is a question that can't really be answered without asking also "violent (or drunken or criminal or racist) by comparison with whom or with what?" It is difficult, offhand, to think of any known society that could be characterized as non-violent, although anthropologists no

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doubt have discovered a few that might seem so by comparison with ourselves. Considering the complexities involved in cross-cultural research, however, we can probably learn more about violence as an American phenomenon if we begin by trying to identify the correlates of differential levels of violence across different segments of the social structure. Then, if our interest is mainly in the practical endeavor of reducing violence levels, such an approach will show us what factors and what segments of the social structure should receive our greatest attention. If our interest, on the other hand (or additionally), is in theory building, then the same approach will perhaps give us empirical clues pointing to heuristic concepts and theories. This paper will attempt to identify the major correlates of violent proclivities among a large sample of American high school students. After the presentation of the data, there will follow a discussion of possible theoretical implications of our findings.

DATA AND MEASURES

The present study is a secondary analysis of data originally gathered in 1968 by one of our colleagues for a large-scale replication of Murray Straus's work on gratification deferral (Garland, 1968, Straus, 1962). The data are derived from 2,361 questionnaires administered to students in four different high schools: one high school in a small urban area in the northwestern part of the state of Washington, a second high school in a semi-rural town also in western Washington; a third high school in a traditional rural community in northern Wisconsin, and the fourth in an urban area in Connecticut. The questionnaires were administered to the entire freshman and junior classes in each of the four schools under optimum conditions by teachers and adminis-

trators who were collaborators in the original project. Therefore, although the schools in the sample were not randomly selected, they were located in a variety of regions and ecological settings; furthermore, within each school, the samples taken (i.e. entire grade cohorts) would seem to be fully representative.

The measure for the main dependent variable in the present study (i.e. "predisposition to violence") was an index based upon three attitudinal items in the original questionnaire: (1) A person is better off solving arguments using reason and cleverness, rather than resorting to rough stuff. (2) When a person becomes angry, it is better that he let his temper quiet down before trying to settle the argument. (3) The person who usually wins an argument is most often the best fighter, not the slickest talker. (In the original Garland study, these items were used as operational measures of "deferral of gratification-by-aggression"). These items all refer explicitly to the issue of giving physical vent to anger, presumably (for high school students) through fighting. We are aware of the complications involved in assuming that verbal responses to attitudinal items can be taken as measures of actual behavior, but for purposes of this study we will define these items as indicators of predisposition to physical violence. The items were all scaled in Likert fashion and scored for the index as follows: 2 points for answering "agree strongly" to the third item and for answering "disagree strongly" to each of the other two items; 1 point for answering "agree somewhat" to the third item and "disagree somewhat" to each of the others. The resulting composite "Index of Predisposition to Violence" had a range of 0 to 6, which was subsequently collapsed into the following four categories: Very

Low (score of 0 or 1), Low (2), Medium (3 or 4), and High (5 or 6). Approximately 60% of the sample fell into the Very Low category, 4% into the High, and the remainder more or less evenly divided between Low and Medium.

The several independent variables in the study were, for the most part, measured in ways quite standard to our craft. In addition to age and sex, we employed a measure of socio-economic status based simply on father's occupation, with the designation "Lower-Middle Class" referring to a variety of blue-collar or working-class occupations; "Middle-Middle" to clerical and petty white-collar occupations and "Upper-Middle" to the professional and managerial ranks. Our sample did not seem to include a truly lower-class or upper-class segment.

In measuring scholastic performance, we used the designation "above average" for students reporting grades of "mostly A's or B's", "average" for "mostly C's", and "below average" for the rest. In categorizing the Protestant religious denominations, we followed the system used by Glock and Stark (1965, pp. 120-121). Our measure of perceived reference group norms on violence was an index based on the following three items, which were then scored in the same general manner as was the earlier index: (1) Most young people I know prefer to settle their arguments with their fists rather than by smooth talk. (2) The advice that most young people I know would give to two people in an argument is to "cool off" before attempting to settle the dispute. (3) In a serious argument, most of my friends would prefer to try to settle the matter by reason rather than by fists.

Finally, our measure of general gratification deferral was another index based on the three items below, again scored in the same general way as the other two indices: (1) It's a shame to have to spend so

much time in school learning about things which have no bearing on my future plans. (2) Money is made to spend, not to save. (3) It is far better to put off today's pleasures for tomorrow's greater rewards.

FINDINGS

Tables 1 and 2 provide some indication of age-role and sex-role influences upon violence proclivity among the adolescents in our sample. The findings correspond in general to those of the 1968 Harris Poll conducted for the Media Task Force of the national Violence Commission (reported in Lange, Baker, and Ball, 1969).[1] There is a modest inverse relation between violence proclivity and age, while the rather sharp difference between boys and girls seems to reflect the tie between physical aggressiveness and masculinity which has often been noted in our culture (e.g. Stark and EcEvoy; Frantz, 1969).

Tables 1 and 2 about here

A word of explanation is in order here about the derivation of the "simplified version" of these first two tables; If we look first at the original versions, we can see that the principal divergence in the data is between the first two rows in each table; that is, the figures in row one ("Very Low") get larger as we go across the table, whereas the figures in all the other rows tend to get smaller, suggesting a dichotomous tendency in the data as between the first row and the other three. This tendency is perhaps to be expected if we recall the scoring system used for the Index of Predisposition to Violence: the designation "Very Low" refers to those who scored zero or one on the Index, or, in other words, those who at most gave one "somewhat" answer to only one

of the indicators. Such respondents are virtually without violence proclivities, according to our measures, in contrast to the respondents represented by the other three rows, who (even for a "Low" rating) gave a response of "definitely" to at least one of the indicators. In view of both the scoring system and the divergence in the data, therefore, it seems reasonable to dichotomize the tables in such a way that all respondents <u>not</u> scoring "Very Low" be lumped together into a category which we shall hereafter call "violence-prone" (recognizing that this may be a somewhat exaggerated abbreviation for the phenomenon we are discussing). Since all of our tables exhibited this same divergence in the data at the same place, we shall for convenience present only the simplified versions of the tables hereafter.

Table 3 about here

In Table 3, we can see the effect of socio-economic status upon our figures, and this effect is not very noteworthy, perhaps because we have essentially only a middle-class sample. At the same time, however, this table would be consistent with the Media Task Force Harris data, which also showed little or no variation by social class in assent to violence (Stark & McEvoy, 1970).

Table 4 about here

Perhaps our first really remarkable table is number 4, which indicates a strong inverse relation between violence-proneness and school success. This finding is not really too surprising considering

the well established similar relation in the professional literature between delinquency and school success. The finding, furthermore, is susceptible to any of several theoretical interpretations, ranging from Freudian to Mertonian.

Table 5 about here

The impact of religious identification is shown in Table 5, which perhaps raises more questions than it would answer. In some ways this table would accord with what we might expect from other literature: for example, the table generally offers an indication of an association between conservative Christian orthodoxy and violence-proneness, which is reminiscent of the relation which Glock and Stark (1966) found between orthodoxy (or conservatism) and anti-Semitism. Some of the Psychological literature has suggested a relation between religious conservatism and authoritarianism, which in turn, seems to have a relation to hostility (e.g. Allport, 1958 Rokeach, 1960). An anomalous note in all of this, though, is the figure for those having no formal religious identification, and it is difficult to comment further on this figure in view of the rather heterogeneous nature of that category.

Table 6 about here

Table 6 suggests that there is rather a strong relation between one's own violent proclivities and one's perception of peer group norms. Again, this is hardly an unexpected finding in view of the abundant literature on the power of group norms in (lower class) delinquent and violent juvenile gangs (e.g. Cohen, 1955; Miller, 1958; Short, 1968). However, considering that we have here essentially a

middle-class sample, the peer-based variations are rather interesting. This finding perhaps points to the need for investigating the peer-group context in which violence may be expressed among essentially "normal middle-class youngsters."

Table 7 about here

Table 7 bears upon the work of Murray Straus and others on the concept of deferred gratification (Straus, 1962; Schneider & Lysgaard, 1953). In attempting to refine and operationalize this essentially Weberian notion, Straus postulated several different dimensions of gratification deferral, including the deferral of gratification through release of aggression. An earlier colleqgue of ours (Garland, 1968) has successfully devised measures for each of Straus's various dimensions, as well as a general measure of gratification deferral. It is the latter which appears in Table 7 as the independent variable, and our dependent variable here is also very similar to the same colleague's measure of aggression-deferral (though, of course, an inverse version of it) (Garland, 1969). What Table 7 suggests, simply, is that violence-proneness and aggression-deferral are opposites; and if aggression-deferral is an aspect of the more general gratification-deferral syndrome, then we should expect the presence of that syndrome to reduce violent proclivities, which is clearly what happens in Table 7.

Table 8 about here

Table 8 provides a kind of quick statistical summary of the relative importance of the various factors which we have seen are related to

violence-proneness in our sample of high school students. Using a step-wise regression computer program, we have ascertained the net independent impact of each of our independent variables and arranged then in order according to that impact. The correlation coefficients are cumulative, indicating how much each factor adds to its predecessors on the list. We can see that the first two factors alone, grades and sex, account for .24 of the correlation with violence- proneness, while adding the remaining five factors would enable us to account for .31 altogether. All in all, this summary is strongly reminiscent of what the literature shows about the chief determinants of juvenile delinquency, i.e. that delinquency is very much related to sex and school success, as well as to reference group norms and middle-class value commitments like gratification deferral (e.g. Cohen 1955; Dubin, 1959; Miller, 1958).

DISCUSSION

We have used a large body of high school student data to examine the separate and combined effects of several relevant variables upon the proclivity for violence of middle-class youth, insofar as such proclivity can be inferred from verbal normative expressions. Incidentally, the Media Task Force report (Lange, Baker, and Ball, 1969) provided convincing evidence that verbally expressed norms were indeed reliable indicators of actual behavioral experience with violence.

Although our measures have been rather gross, they do seem to have worked out reasonably well in a practical sense. The findings generally have been in the directions that we would have hypothesized from the large body of traditional literature on youth culture, on middle-class values, and on juvenile delinquency; such is particularly the case for our findings on sex, age, school success, and reference group norms.

Furthermore, our findings generally coincide with those reported from the Media Task Force data with respect to the factors of sex, youth norms, and social class (the latter of minimal importance). Our work goes somewhat beyond that already reported from the Media Task Force in the following respects: (1) It identifies additional factors (e.g. religion and school success) that might be significantly related to violence proclivity, and (2) It suggests a partial theoretical grounding for the explanation of violence proclivity in the gratification-deferral tradition.

The question of theoretical grounding, indeed, is one of the more perplexing ones to us in the entire enterprise of the study of violence. On the one hand, one is inclined to regard physical violence (and norms supporting it) as a form of deviant behavior, particularly in view of the fact that violence has traditionally been regarded as such a problematical trait of delinquent juvenile gangs. Furthermore, as this paper has indicated, many of the independent variables associated with delinquency seem also to be associated with violent proclivities (e.g. sex, school success, and group norms). Considerations such as these seem to point us to deviance theory for the explanation of violence.

On the other hand, if we follow the Media Task Force distinction between violence of "low-level" and violence of "high-level" (the former being limited to punching and slapping), then we must say that in American culture generally and in youth culture specifically, the norms relating to low-level violence are ambivalent, to say the least, and perhaps even supportive of violence. The great majority of both adults and teenagers accept the propriety of fist-fighting for boys, according to the Media Task Force Harris Poll data (Lange, Baker, and

Ball, 1969, Stark & McEvoy, 1970). Furthermore, as we can readily see from the report of the Violence Commission's Task Force on Historical and Comparative Perspectives, the entire culture, history and literature of America have reflected an ambivalence toward violence, if not, indeed, a positive support for it in the prosecution of a "worthy cause", whether lawful or not (Graham and Gurr, 1969). In the data presented here in this paper, the rates of violence-proneness reached about 50% or more among the very young, among the males, among the average students (61% among those below average!), among the Roman Catholics, among those in certain reference groups, and among those low in gratification deferral. Even in the categories relatively low in violence-proneness in our various tables, the figures consistently reached a third, which is a substantial minority. In view of the findings of both ourselves and others, then, it is difficult to regard low-level violence, at least, as deviant behavior. If it is more normative than deviant, then clearly we must look to something other than deviance theory for our explanations. Our data suggest that perhaps we should look at least to age-role, sex-role and even religious socialization, as well as to the more obvious matter of peer-group norms. Furthermore, we need more understanding of the psycho-social matrix within which we get such a strong inverse relation between school success and violent proclivities. Does the explanation lie simply with the good old Freudian frustration-aggression syndrome, or is there more to it? Finally, is there any theoretical yield to be expected from pursuing the deferred gratification perspective? Can it provide us with insights any more profound than the simple-minded observation that "Kids who are not taught to control their tempers get in fights."? In any event, it looks as though the theoretical

enterprise in the study of violence is wide open, certainly, at least, among youth who are presumably as "straight middle-class" as the ones who formed the data base for this study.

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[1]The research work of the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence (co-directed by James F. Short and Marvin E. Wolfgang) was assigned largely to a series of Task Forces, each of which produced a report to the Commission. At least one of these reports was published as a Signet book (Graham and Gurr herein), and another was "Violence and the Media" (referred to in this paper as the "Media Task Force Report"). The latter report was the only one to make any significant use of attitudinal survey data, in the form (primarily) of Harris Poll data.

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TABLES FOR

"Middle Class Youth and Proclivities for Violence"

TABLE 1

Predisposition to Violence by Age

(Original Version)

Predisp. to Violence	Age 13	14	15	16	17+
Very Low	51%	55%	57%	66%	66%
Low	23	21	19	18	18
Medium	19	21	19	11	13
High	7	4	5	5	3
N (100%) =	164	618	611	420	530

(Simplified Version)

	Age 13	14	15	16	17+
Violence-prone	49%	45%	43%	34%	34%
N (100%) =	164	618	611	420	530

TABLE 2

Precisposition to Violence by Sex

(Original Version)

Predisp. to Violence	Sex Male	Female
Very Low	52%	68%
Low	21	18
Medium	20	14
High	7	2
N (100%) =	1112	1231

(Simplified Version)

	Sex Male	Female
Violence-prone	48%	32%
N (100%) =	1112	1231

(NOTE: Hereafter only simplified versions of tables will be presented.)

TABLE 3

Predisposition to Violence by Socio-Economic Status

(Simplified Version)

	SES		
	Lower-Middle	Middle-Middle	Upper Middle
Violence-prone	43%	43%	34%
N (100%) =	763	979	601

TABLE 4

Predisposition to Violence by Scholastic Performance

	Grades		
	Above Average	Average	Below Average
Violence-prone	32%	46%	61%
N (100%) =	1079	1155	109

TABLE 5

Predisposition to Violence by Religion

	Denominational Type				
	Jew	Mod/Lib. Protestant	Fund/Cons. Protestant	Rom. Cath.	No Formal
Violence-prone	31%	32%	39%	44%	48%
N (100%) =	51	499	678	793	305

TABLE 6

Predisposition to Violence by Perceived Reference Group Norms on Violence

	Perceived Ref. Group Acceptance of Violence			
	Very Low	Low	Medium	High
Violence-prone	34%	43%	49%	53%
N (100%) =	1053	872	264	154

TABLE 7

Predisposition to Violence by Index of Gratification Deferral

	Rank on Index of Gratification Deferral			
	Very Low	Low	Medium	High
Violence-prone	48%	48%	39%	31%
N (100%) =	376	453	1039	475

TABLE 8

Stepwise Regression Ranks of Variables Associated with Predisposition to Violence

Independent Variables	Cumulative r's (with Pred. to Viol. as Dep. Var.)
grades	.18
sex	.24
age	.26
ref. grp.	.28
grat. def.	.29
religion	.30
SES	.31